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RR RUEHTRO
DE RUEHSF #0981 2211411
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 091411Z AUG 07
FM AMEMBASSY SOFIA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 4127
INFO RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0265

UNCLAS SOFIA 000981

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL LY BU

SUBJECT: BULGARIA RECOVERS FROM NURSES' RETURN

Ref: Sofia 924

¶1. On August 2, the GOB approved forgiving USD 56.635 million of communist-era debt owed by Libya. This debt forgiveness was Bulgaria's contribution to the deal brokered by the EU for Libya to release five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor. Whatever else may be murky in the deal, Bulgaria's debt forgiveness is both public and completed.

¶2. Since the nurses' July 24 return home, Bulgarian government and society have been working to reintegrate them into a country that has substantially changed over eight years. The Palestinian doctor, who announced he wishes to remain in Bulgaria, has also been warmly welcomed. After their return the nurses spent two weeks at the government's VIP residential compound outside Sofia. The GOB promised to find all the medics jobs, and a number of hospitals have offered positions. The GOB gave each medic 10,000 leva (USD 7,000), is covering their medical bills (two of the nurses needed unspecified surgery), and covered pension and medical insurance payments for the past eight years. Phone company MTEL is providing each with an apartment and cell phone, a local newspaper owner gave each another 10,000 leva, and a local construction company is renovating one nurse's rural house. Two nurses have been provided with hotel rooms in Bulgaria's premier ski resort as they readjust to life in Bulgaria. Sofia's mayor offered to pay for language classes and to help the Palestinian doctor settle in Sofia.

¶3. Although a few groups complained the nurses were getting more than ordinary citizens facing economic problems, the aftermath of the medics' return has seen surprisingly little rancor and recrimination. Bulgaria has, for the most part, moved on. When one nurse's son demanded 100,000 euros from the GOB as compensation for its failure to free the medics, the medics themselves announced they had no claim on the government. Most Bulgarian press, always eager to jump at a scandal, have stated the GOB did what it could. The only scandals have been minor blips in the press, caused by France's Avocats sans Frontieres (ASF). International press quoted ASF lawyer Stephane Zerbib as claiming the medics were being held prisoner in the presidential residence and would seek political asylum in France. Another ASF lawyer, Emmanuel Altit, reportedly arrived in Sofia shortly after the medics and tried to persuade them to sue the GOB. The medics deny any intent to seek asylum abroad or sue the GOB. The Palestinian doctor is apparently seeking to take Libya to court on torture charges, but this is unlikely to be a hot button issue here.

¶4. All in all, jubilation at the nurses' return has segued to near matter-of-fact normalcy. If the nurses speak out about their experience, that could change. For now, the mood is one of relief and recuperation.

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